Gabriel Kolko — The Politics of War
Complete Chapter Summaries (Chapters 1–20)

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Chapter 1 – The Politics of Strategy in Europe
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Kolko opens by arguing that Allied strategy in Europe was political from the very start: military decisions in 1943–44 were made with an eye to shaping the postwar order as much as defeating Germany. The United States pushed for a rapid cross-Channel invasion, not only because it promised a more direct military route to victory, but because it would give Washington decisive influence over Western Europe's liberation and reconstruction. Britain, by contrast, favored peripheral operations in the Mediterranean and Balkans, seeking to prolong its own diplomatic leverage and protect imperial interests. Kolko emphasizes that these differences were not simply tactical disagreements; they reflected incompatible visions of Europe's future and of each power's role in it.

At the same time, he stresses that there was never a unified Allied grand design for the continent. Instead, strategic arguments over where to fight Germany masked deeper conflicts over who would control liberated territories, how far social and political change would go, and whether radical movements—especially the Left and resistance organizations—would be allowed a major role in postwar governments. The early tensions between U.S. and British planners therefore prefigured the breakdown of the wartime coalition: the seeds of postwar rivalry lay in the very way the war was fought, as each ally attempted to wage a war that would produce a peace compatible with its own interests and ideology.

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Chapter 2 – The Problem of the Left and Allied Cooperation in Europe
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In Chapter 2, Kolko examines how the presence and strength of the European Left—particularly Communist and left-socialist movements—complicated Allied cooperation. American and British policymakers were deeply concerned that resistance movements, trade unions, and mass parties in occupied countries might emerge from the war with enough prestige to dominate postwar politics. This concern shaped their attitudes toward resistance groups in France, Italy, and the Balkans: while the Allies needed these forces militarily, they feared their political ambitions. Kolko argues that this fear drove an underlying consensus between Washington and London: priority should be given to conservative or moderate elements, even if they had been compromised by prewar failures or wartime passivity.

The Soviets, meanwhile, were trying to balance their own support for local Communist movements with the need to maintain the Grand Alliance. Kolko emphasizes that Moscow was often more cautious than Western opinion admitted, but the West interpreted any Soviet link to resistance movements as evidence of a revolutionary design for Europe. The "problem of the Left" thus became a key fault line inside the alliance. It reinforced British hesitation over a rapid invasion of France, fed American worries about revolutionary upheavals, and pushed both Western Allies to look for ways to manage or contain radical forces that were, in reality, the most energetic opponents of fascism. Cooperation against Germany, in other words, coexisted uneasily with a growing fear of social revolution.

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Chapter 3 – Italy and the Restoration of Order
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Kolko turns to Italy as the first major test case of Allied political strategy in liberating an Axis country. After Mussolini's fall and the armistice, Italy descended into political chaos: a discredited monarchy, a deeply unpopular conservative government under Badoglio, and a rapidly expanding resistance movement, much of it led by Communists and left-leaning forces. The Allies chose to back the monarchy and Badoglio's government, viewing them as the only instruments capable of ensuring order and preventing "anarchy" or "Bolshevization." Kolko stresses that this decision reflected political priorities rather than Italian realities: the royalist regime had little legitimacy, while the resistance had real social roots and local authority.

The chapter shows how British and American policy in Italy set a pattern that would recur elsewhere: the use of conservative elites and fragile transitional governments to suppress or marginalize popular movements, even at the cost of internal instability. The Committee of National Liberation and the northern resistance were treated as tools of military convenience rather than legitimate political actors, and Allied occupation authorities consistently shored up the old order rather than embracing a thorough transformation. By the end of 1944, Kolko argues, Italy had become a laboratory in which the United States and Britain tested the limits of reconstructing a former enemy along conservative lines while trying to contain the Left—an experiment that revealed the tensions inherent in their broader European strategy.

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Chapter 4 – Winds from the North: The Resistance

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Chapter 4 focuses on the resistance movements in northern Italy as a distinct political and military phenomenon. Kolko shows that by late 1943 and 1944, partisan forces in the north—organized under CLNAI and similar structures—had become an important power in their own right, not merely auxiliaries to the Allied armies. They created parallel administrations, judicial systems, and welfare structures in areas outside German and fascist control. These institutions expressed a broad range of ideological currents, but they were dominated by movements that sought substantial social and political change after the war, including land reform and expanded workers' rights. The resistance thus represented both a military challenge to the Axis and an implicit challenge to any attempt to restore the old Italian order.

The Allies reacted ambiguously. While they provided weapons and support when it suited their military needs, British and American authorities also limited aid, relying heavily on monarchist agents and insisting that resistance forces not become a political rival to the Badoglio government. Kolko argues that this tension reflected a recurring Allied dilemma: the most effective anti-fascist forces were also the most determined to transform their societies. By the time the Allies reached northern Italy in 1945, the resistance had already shaped local power structures, and the subsequent attempts to normalize and centralize authority under conservative auspices exposed the depth of the conflict between Allied strategic goals and the aspirations of those who had actually fought on the ground.

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Chapter 5 – Eastern Europe, I: The Case of Poland

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Kolko begins his analysis of Eastern Europe with Poland, which he describes as the most sensitive and explosive test case of Soviet–Western relations. The historical Polish–Russian antagonism, the settlement at Riga, and the 1939 division of Poland under the Hitler–Stalin pact all created a legacy of mistrust that made compromise extraordinarily difficult. The Polish government-in-exile, rooted in interwar conservative politics, insisted on prewar frontiers and sovereignty, while the Soviets viewed

that same interwar regime as irredeemably hostile and structurally anti-Russian. For Moscow, Poland was not simply another country; it was the key corridor through which past invasions had come, and the behavior of the exile government confirmed their view that a return to the old arrangements would threaten Soviet security.

The United States, Kolko argues, treated Poland as a primarily diplomatic problem and persistently underestimated the depth of the underlying conflict. American planners approached the issue with abstract formulas about free elections and representative government, without proposing workable solutions to the territorial and political disputes that had shaped Polish history for decades. They refused to accept that Soviet security concerns and Polish nationalism were locked in a zero-sum relationship under prevailing conditions. As a result, U.S. policy toward Poland combined moralistic rhetoric with practical impotence: America could neither force Soviet concessions nor provide an alternative security structure. Poland therefore became the symbolic core of the emerging East–West confrontation, exposing the limits of Western influence and the failure of Allied diplomacy to address the fundamental issues at stake.

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Chapter 6 – Eastern Europe, II: Diverse Paths to Security
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Kolko argues that Soviet policy in Eastern Europe by 1943–44 cannot be understood through a single ideological or expansionist blueprint; rather, the USSR pursued country-specific strategies rooted in its security needs, wartime experiences, and assessments of each nation's political leadership. He begins with Czechoslovakia, whose leader Edvard Beneš drew profound lessons from Munich: only a stable, long-term understanding between the West and the Soviet Union could guarantee Czechoslovakia's security. Beneš sought to position his country as the "bridge" between the West and the USSR, believing that Western distrust of Soviet power had enabled German aggression in 1938. Accepting that the postwar world would be shaped by great-power blocs, he consciously aligned his government-in-exile with Moscow—not out of ideological sympathy but as a pragmatic survival strategy. The Soviets, for their part, cultivated exemplary relations with the Czechs, seeing in Beneš a reliable partner willing to acknowledge Soviet security concerns. Kolko uses this case to demonstrate that Soviet diplomacy could be cooperative, moderate, and rooted in mutual accommodation when local leaders accepted the basic premises of postwar Eurasian security as defined in Moscow.

Kolko then contrasts Czechoslovakia sharply with Finland and Romania, illustrating how the USSR adopted starkly different approaches depending on the nature of each state's wartime conduct and political character. In Finland's case, despite bitter conflict since 1939, the Soviets repeatedly offered moderate terms—territorial adjustments, reparations, and defensive guarantees rather than occupation or regime change. Though Western leaders feared Soviet annexation, the eventual 1944 settlement was unexpectedly lenient: reparations were reduced, base rights limited, neutrality accepted, and no attempt was made to impose communism. Romania, by contrast, received a more controlling Soviet presence, yet even there the USSR experimented with an "Italian formula" that reshaped but did not destroy existing political institutions. By October 1944, Kolko argues, Soviet policy across Eastern Europe had become unmistakably pluralistic: conciliatory in Finland, cooperative in Czechoslovakia, interventionist in Romania, and uncompromising in Poland. This diversity—fluid, pragmatic, and driven by perceptions of reliability—made it impossible for Western governments to interpret Soviet intentions consistently. The very variety of Soviet actions created deep anxiety in London and Washington and pushed them to begin forming their own independent strategies for the region, setting

the stage for the intensifying diplomatic conflict of late 1944 and early 1945.

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Chapter 7 – Eastern Europe, III: “With Bow Against Bear” (October 1944–January 1945)
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Kolko argues that by October 1944, Churchill believed the political fate of Eastern Europe could still be influenced—but only through direct diplomacy with Stalin, since Britain lacked the military strength to alter events on the ground. The Red Army’s advance had produced a sweeping political vacuum, and Churchill feared that without quick intervention the region would fall under “Bolshevized” governments emerging in the wake of Soviet liberation. Having failed to secure American support for a southern strategy to block Soviet expansion militarily, Churchill turned to the Moscow negotiations of October 1944—the “percentages agreement”—as a last attempt to stabilize British influence. Kolko emphasizes that this was not a grand design but a defensive improvisation born of weakness. Britain relied almost exclusively on the monarchy, conservative émigrés, and prewar elites in Greece, Yugoslavia, and Romania, even though these groups lacked legitimacy. Churchill was trying, essentially, to freeze a crumbling imperial order in place through ad hoc bargains. Yet the bargains themselves mostly ratified what Soviet armies had already achieved, since Britain had no means of contesting Soviet occupation zones.

Kolko contrasts Churchill’s tactical realism with the United States’ more abstract and passive posture, arguing that American policy deepened the crisis by refusing both British–Soviet bargains and any coherent alternative. Washington agreed that Soviet expansion posed dangers but rejected Churchill’s spheres-of-influence approach, insisting instead on ambiguous principles that avoided concrete commitments. The U.S. simultaneously opposed Soviet political domination in Eastern Europe and undermined British attempts to limit it, producing a situation where no Western power had a workable strategy for the region. Kolko argues that the division of Europe did not originate in the percentages deal—rather, the deal merely formalized a division already created by military realities and by the failure, earlier in the war, to construct an all-European political mechanism. By late 1944, each Allied power was consolidating control where its armies stood, and the political partition of Europe flowed less from ideology than from structural incapacity: the Western Allies lacked both the military reach and political coherence to shape Eastern Europe’s postwar trajectory. It was in this climate of suspicion, improvisation, and power asymmetry that the final breakdown of Allied unity began.

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Chapter 8 – The Greek Passion
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Kolko argues that Greece in 1943–44 was the most explosive and politically revealing case in the Balkans because Britain tried to restore a prewar social and political order that no longer existed. The Greek monarchy and its allied exile politicians—rooted in the old Venizelist–anti-Venizelist divide—possessed almost no domestic legitimacy after three years of famine, occupation, and societal breakdown. Meanwhile, the only functioning national institutions inside Greece were those built by EAM-ELAS, the mass resistance movement whose strength and discipline dwarfed that of any of the exile factions. Kolko emphasizes that the British decision to back the monarchy and suppress the Resistance was not driven by Greek realities but by imperial strategy: Churchill saw Greece as a lynchpin of Britain’s Eastern Mediterranean position and believed that allowing a radical or even moderately left-leaning government to emerge in Athens would jeopardize British influence from Cairo to Cyprus. Thus Britain committed itself early to restoring a conservative, externally backed Greek state.

The result, Kolko argues, was a catastrophic clash between Britain's strategic ambitions and Greece's transformed social landscape. The exile government demanded British military support and territorial claims even though it had almost no legitimacy inside Greece. Churchill attempted to impose a top-down political solution, but EAM-ELAS had created parallel administrative and welfare institutions that made it a genuine governing alternative. Kolko stresses that the tragedy of Greece was not Soviet intervention—Moscow stayed distant—but Britain's inability to accept the new social reality. London's insistence on reinstalling a discredited monarchy and suppressing the Resistance set Greece on a path toward civil war, demonstrating the broader pattern in which Allied postwar policy aimed to reconstruct conservative regimes even when local conditions had moved decisively beyond them.

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Chapter 9 – Eastern Europe, IV: The Final Crisis, 1944–45
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Kolko argues that by late 1944 and early 1945, the political fate of Eastern Europe reached a decisive turning point as the Red Army's advance created a chain reaction across the region, collapsing the prewar order and forcing the Western Allies to confront a reality they could neither influence nor reverse. As Soviet forces liberated and occupied nation after nation, the internal social and political structures of each state—already weakened by war, fascist rule, or collaborationist elites—broke down with astonishing speed. A broad social shift toward radical reform emerged organically among local populations. Kolko emphasizes that this upheaval was not orchestrated by Moscow; instead the Left's rise reflected responses to years of oppression and destruction. The West misread these developments as Soviet coercion.

Meanwhile, the Western Allies clung to abstract demands for "free elections" and restoration of the prewar order—demands entirely detached from the social realities on the ground. American planners increasingly defined policy by economic objectives: restoring prewar trade patterns and blocking nationalization movements. This made the U.S. the indirect ally of conservative factions with little domestic support. Soviet policy tolerated a wide variety of arrangements so long as Eastern Europe remained politically non-hostile. Thus the final crisis crystallized a structural division: Soviet security demanded consolidation; American aims required blocking radicalization; Britain, exhausted, maneuvered between them.

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Chapter 10 – The Epic of China
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Kolko argues that the China theater exposed the deepest contradictions in American global strategy, revealing both the limits of U.S. power and the incoherence of its political objectives. Washington clung to Chiang Kai-shek's government despite its corruption, paralysis, and unpopularity. U.S. leaders supported Chiang because he represented the conservative China they wanted—not the China that existed. Massive aid failed to stabilize the regime.

Meanwhile, the Communists built a decentralized, legitimate rural order grounded in land reform and administrative competence. American intelligence acknowledged CCP strengths, but policymakers dismissed this because it contradicted diplomatic goals. Kolko presents China as the pivotal example of U.S. refusal to confront political reality: Washington tried to impose moderation on a society in revolution while backing a collapsing elite.

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Chapter 11 – Planning for Peace, I: General Principles
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Kolko argues that American wartime planning for the postwar world was shaped far more by economic ideology and long-standing commercial objectives than by any coherent philosophy of reconstruction. By 1943–44, the United States envisioned a postwar order organized around multilateral trade, dollar stability, open markets, and the dismantling of all systems of imperial preference and autarky. American planners believed that the Great Depression had been caused by closed trading blocs and excessive state intervention; therefore, preventing future crises required reviving global capitalism under U.S. leadership. Institutions such as Bretton Woods, the IMF, and the World Bank were conceived not as neutral bodies but as instruments to ensure a world economy compatible with U.S. industrial power.

Yet the Americans had no parallel political framework capable of addressing the profound social transformations occurring across Europe. Kolko emphasizes that the U.S. completely underestimated the radicalization of populations in France, Italy, Eastern Europe, and Asia—countries devastated by occupation and now demanding land reform, nationalization, and new political structures. Instead, Washington assumed that "moderate," business-friendly elites would naturally reassert themselves if only markets were reopened. This ideological blindness meant that U.S. planning for peace was divorced from the political realities that would shape the postwar world.

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Chapter 12 – Planning for Peace, II: Practical Realities
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Kolko shows that when U.S. planners tried to implement their abstract economic vision, they collided immediately with the actual conditions of Europe's shattered economies. Reconstruction required strong state intervention, rationing systems, emergency controls, and broad social reforms—precisely the measures Washington viewed with suspicion. In France and Italy, powerful resistance movements and labor organizations demanded transformative policies that clashed with American preferences for fiscal austerity and rapid liberalization. In Eastern Europe, the entire prewar economic structure had collapsed, and only radical solutions such as agrarian reform and nationalization could stabilize society.

At the same time, Kolko emphasizes that the U.S. ignored the political consequences of its own policies. Washington wanted to suppress Soviet influence while also blocking indigenous Left-wing movements, which often enjoyed the only real legitimacy. To do so, the U.S. backed conservative elites who had little credibility and no social base. The result was that American demands—currency stabilization, balanced budgets, restored private enterprise—intensified social pressure, undermined moderate governments, and strengthened radicalization. The gap between American ideals and European realities widened into a structural contradiction.

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Chapter 13 – The United States and British Interests in the Eastern Hemisphere
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Kolko argues that by 1944–45, the U.S. had begun a systematic challenge to the foundations of British imperial power. Britain emerged from the war financially ruined and dependent on American loans, yet it still hoped to preserve its empire, its exclusive colonial markets, and its system of imperial preference. These ambitions directly conflicted with the American vision of a postwar world built on open markets and free trade. Washington rejected all forms of imperial exclusivity, not out of anti-colonial idealism, but because American industry sought access to the markets and raw materials

controlled by Britain.

This conflict remained masked behind the façade of Allied cooperation, but Kolko shows that the U.S. used its vast economic leverage—especially in Lend-Lease and postwar loan negotiations—to force Britain to dismantle the economic foundations of empire. American policy extended into Egypt, India, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, where Washington often supported nationalist movements when doing so weakened British control. Kolko concludes that the United States did not set out deliberately to destroy the British Empire; rather, the global economic system the U.S. intended to build left no room for imperial structures of any kind.

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Chapter 14 – The Politics of German Recovery
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Kolko argues that Germany's reconstruction became the most important postwar problem, and U.S. and British planning was riddled with contradictions. Americans entered Germany with no clear vision, wavering between punitive impulses—rooted in fear of renewed militarism—and the recognition that Europe's recovery required a functioning German industrial base. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau pushed for deindustrialization, while other officials warned that such policies would cause economic collapse and strengthen the Left. Britain, needing German coal and industrial output, resisted American punitive schemes. The debate reflected a deeper ideological struggle: the U.S. wanted both to punish Germany and to restore a liberal capitalist system that required German industrial revival.

Politically, the U.S. wanted a democratic Germany but also hoped to revive pre-Nazi conservative elites, who no longer had legitimacy or institutional coherence. Meanwhile, workers and civilians demanded radical changes—land reform, nationalization of heavy industry, new political structures. The U.S. refused to accept these social realities and attempted to impose a moderate, business-friendly order on a society shattered by total war. The result, Kolko argues, was paralysis: de-Nazification proceeded unevenly, local governments improvised solutions, and the Allies dismantled Nazi structures without providing viable replacements. Germany became the clearest example of the inability of American ideology to meet postwar realities.

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Chapter 15 – Unconditional Surrender and the Crisis of Germany, 1945
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Kolko argues that the doctrine of unconditional surrender—originally adopted for symbolic reasons—produced immense strategic, political, and humanitarian costs in the final phase of the war. It prolonged fighting by removing any incentive for German moderates to overthrow Hitler and created chaos when German institutions collapsed without any framework for orderly surrender. Local German commanders hesitated to capitulate for fear of violating Berlin's orders, forcing the Allies into improvised arrangements that undermined their own stated policy. Unconditional surrender also meant that as the Nazi state disintegrated, the Allies entered a political vacuum with no prepared administrative structure.

The political consequences were equally severe. The U.S. demanded democratization, de-Nazification, economic revival, and social stability, but had no means of reconciling these conflicting goals. Millions of refugees, destroyed infrastructure, starvation, and social collapse overwhelmed Allied capabilities. Radical demands emerged from below, while American authorities blocked Left-wing political developments. Kolko argues that unconditional surrender created the very conditions the Allies feared most: disorder, radicalization, and administrative breakdown—highlighting the ideological rigidity and

strategic incoherence of American policy.

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Chapter 16 – The United States and the USSR: From Alliance to Antagonism
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Kolko argues that by early 1945, the American leadership had already begun reframing the Soviet Union from a wartime ally into the primary postwar geopolitical obstacle. This shift, he maintains, did not arise from Soviet expansionism—since Soviet policy in Eastern Europe remained pragmatic, uneven, and rooted in security needs—but from the internal logic of American global ambitions. As U.S. policymakers advanced plans for an open capitalist world system, they saw Soviet influence, state-directed economies, and radicalized social movements as incompatible with the postwar order they envisioned. Thus Soviet actions that were moderate by regional standards were interpreted in Washington as evidence of ideological aggression. Kolko shows that this dynamic produced a series of diplomatic misreadings: U.S. officials assumed that revolutions in Eastern Europe and Asia were directed from Moscow, when in fact they reflected local political conditions far outside Soviet control.

At the same time, American economic planners viewed the Soviet refusal to integrate into a U.S.–led global financial system as inherently destabilizing. Kolko emphasizes that by 1945, the U.S. was not merely reacting to Soviet policy; it was actively defining a world structure in which state-socialist economies appeared threatening by definition. This ideological framework drove skepticism toward Soviet intentions even when Moscow pursued cooperation, such as in the early United Nations negotiations. As the war ended, U.S. leaders increasingly treated any Soviet assertion of local security needs as a challenge to American leadership, setting the stage for the diplomatic fragmentation that followed.

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Chapter 17 – The United States and Latin America, 1944–45
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Kolko argues that American policy toward Latin America in the last years of the war reveals the global reach of U.S. ambitions and the ideological assumptions underlying its postwar designs. The U.S. sought not only to eliminate Axis influence in the hemisphere but to restructure Latin American economies along lines compatible with American industrial and financial interests. Washington viewed the region as a testing ground for the postwar economic order: expansion of U.S. investment, stabilization policies, dollar dependency, and political realignment behind conservative—but reliably pro-American—governments. Kolko emphasizes that the U.S. supported military regimes and oligarchic structures whenever they promised stability and suppression of the Left, even though many Latin American societies were undergoing significant democratizing and nationalist movements.

U.S. intervention, Kolko argues, was framed as a defense of hemispheric security but was in fact driven by economic and ideological concerns. American planners believed that Latin America must be integrated into a unified capitalist framework, even if this required undermining popular movements and blocking social reforms. The result was the strengthening of elites who offered short-term stability but long-term volatility. In Kolko’s interpretation, the Latin American experience exemplified the contradiction at the heart of U.S. global strategy: the desire to build an open, liberal international order while supporting illiberal local structures that could enforce U.S. economic preferences.

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Chapter 18 – Japan and American Strategy in Asia

Kolko argues that U.S. policy toward Japan during the final phases of the war was shaped by strategic improvisation and ideological rigidity rather than coherent long-term planning. As the U.S. anticipated victory, policymakers debated whether Japan should be dismantled—politically, economically, and territorially—or reconstructed as a conservative bulwark against potential Soviet influence in Asia. The resulting occupation plan reflected both tendencies: a sweeping purge of militarists combined with a determination to preserve Japan's capitalist core and suppress radical reforms advocated by labor movements and grassroots organizations. Kolko stresses that while the U.S. publicly championed democratization, it carefully limited social and economic transformation to prevent Japan from moving toward socialism.

The atomic bombings, in Kolko's analysis, must be understood in this same strategic context: not primarily as a military necessity but as a demonstration of American power to shape the postwar order in Asia. The Soviet declaration of war on Japan and rapid advance in Manchuria threatened the U.S. desire to dominate the Japanese settlement. Kolko argues that the U.S. sought to force surrender before Soviet participation could justify claims to influence in Japan. Thus the end of the Pacific War became a signal moment in the emerging rivalry between the major powers, illustrating how American strategic aims were already oriented toward containing the USSR even before the global conflict had fully concluded.

Chapter 19 – The End of the Asian War, II: Korea and the Settlement of the Pacific

Kolko argues that the settlement of the Pacific war—especially the division of Korea—was driven less by long-term planning than by the chaotic convergence of military improvisation, geopolitical rivalry, and American anxieties about Soviet influence in Asia. Korea, long neglected by U.S. policymakers, became a sudden and urgent problem in August 1945 when the Japanese surrender created a political vacuum across the peninsula. The United States had no prepared policy; American officials had barely considered Korea's future during the war. When the Red Army advanced rapidly into northern Korea, Washington scrambled to assert a presence in the south—not from a commitment to Korean independence, but from fear of complete Soviet control. The arbitrary choice of the 38th parallel stemmed from bureaucratic improvisation rather than strategy, and yet it solidified into a rigid boundary because neither the U.S. nor the USSR trusted the other's intentions.

The broader Pacific settlement reveals contradictions in American postwar aims: the U.S. opposed colonialism rhetorically but often supported European imperial restorations in Southeast Asia to block nationalist movements seen as too radical or too close to communist influence. In China, Manchuria, Indochina, and the Pacific islands, Washington attempted to impose political stability without acknowledging the social revolutions underway. Kolko shows that U.S. policy was driven by fear of losing influence to the USSR and by an insistence on shaping the region within a liberal-capitalist framework. But these assumptions were fundamentally mismatched to the realities of wartime collapse and anti-colonial mobilization. The Pacific settlement thus produced not stability but long-term crises.

Chapter 20 – The Final Diplomacy of Allied Victory

Kolko concludes that the diplomacy of 1945 reflected the collision between abstract American global ambitions, Soviet security imperatives, and Britain's diminishing ability to shape events. At Yalta and

Potsdam, the Allies attempted to coordinate the terms of victory, but their agreements were fragile and ambiguous, masking deep conflicts. The U.S. pressed for political liberalization, open trade, and access to world markets; the Soviet Union, devastated by war, demanded reliable security buffers and political arrangements that prevented hostile regimes on its borders; Britain sought to salvage remnants of imperial influence. Kolko argues that these objectives were structurally incompatible, and the wartime alliance—never unified in its political aims—collapsed as soon as the common threat disappeared.

The final diplomacy of the war did not create a stable postwar order; instead it institutionalized ambiguities that fueled early Cold War tensions. Unresolved territorial issues, competing visions of reconstruction, and the U.S. determination to impose a universal economic model all destabilized the fragile peace. Kolko concludes that the origins of the Cold War lay not in Soviet expansionism but in the global ambitions of the United States—ambitions that required reshaping the world along lines the U.S. was not capable of enforcing without generating conflict. Thus the war ended not with a coherent settlement but with the opening act of a new geopolitical struggle.